PICTURES: ROGER SARGENT

THE REIGN IN SPAIN!

EDITED BY JAMES OLDHAM

LIVE

"Aarrrgghhh!!!" – Thom sees a lighter being waved in the audience

RADIOHEAD

Barcelona Zeleste

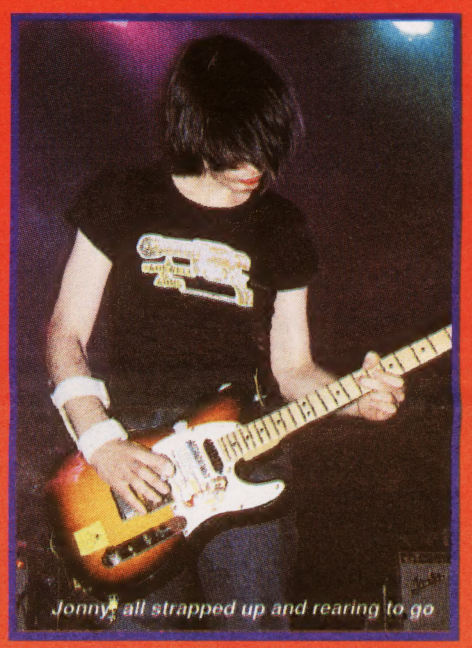
THE MUFFLED squeak of Professor Stephen Hawking cuts through the gentle lollop of warp-funded techno and pursues it to fade. Young, excited Spanish eyes sparkle quizzically as lights are dimmed and smoke wafted. What are these directives?

"Fitter. Happier. More productive..."

A blue light slices into the shaft of white smoke and a bald figure darts behind the drums. Bald, drums... it's Radiohead's bald drummer Phil Selway! A round of applause ripples out from the front and gathers pace as it announces the unseen to the back of the small, packed hall. Hawking is now struggling to be heard over the cheers, but the rotating tape heads keep plugging his monologue.

"...No bad dreams. No paranoia. Careful to all animals. Never washing spiders down the plughole. Keeping contact with old friends. Enjoying a drink now and then..."

It's no good, the clapping has gained an universal rhythm, as well as a chant – either some Catalan imploration, or perhaps a less local "Ho!". The last gasp we hear from the wise man over the PA is of *"an empowered and informed member of society"* as Thom, Ed, Colin and Jonny join their bald colleague onstage, Thom Yorke clenching his guitar tightly and grinning nervously at the delirium from the lip of the stage. For a couple of minutes it seems that Radiohead's first concert of this eagerly anticipated new season will be cancelled due to crowd overexcitement.



Jonny, all strapped up and rearing to go

But a semblance of hush is, of course, eventually achieved by the Zeleste, and with a nod of Yorke's head the first gentle strokes of Jonny Greenwood's dusty guitar usher in the elegant 'Lucky'. As Thom twitches into the space between him and his microphone and starts singing this beautiful song beautifully he is bathed in the spluttering flash from a platoon of photographers. Though temporarily blinded, he still pushes the song up and out of the skylights, out into the warm night air and weaving its elegiac way across this Gaudi-drenched city, across the port and out to sea. Tonight, then, will be alright after all – despite the attendant charter flight full of Europe's most chuffed journalists and record company high rollers inflaming already anxious nerves.

In fact, tonight will be more than alright. Tonight will see Radiohead carve out a fresh new chapter in their history, and fill it with some of the most eloquent and moving musical language ever coined. After a career that has thus far seen them pilloried as one-hit wonders, mocked – at best – for a lack of image and, at worst, branded ugly (by *NME*, we shamefully admit), summarily dismissed as an American phenomenon and ignored in their own country, before being rediscovered and hailed, laughably, as the new U2, it would be understandable if

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tonight's performance showcasing their genuinely awesome and innovative forthcoming 'OK Computer' album was fused with rowdy vindication. Not a bit of it. Perhaps when you've been gifted with a collection of songs of such timeless melancholy and loveliness then you can only concentrate on playing them well.

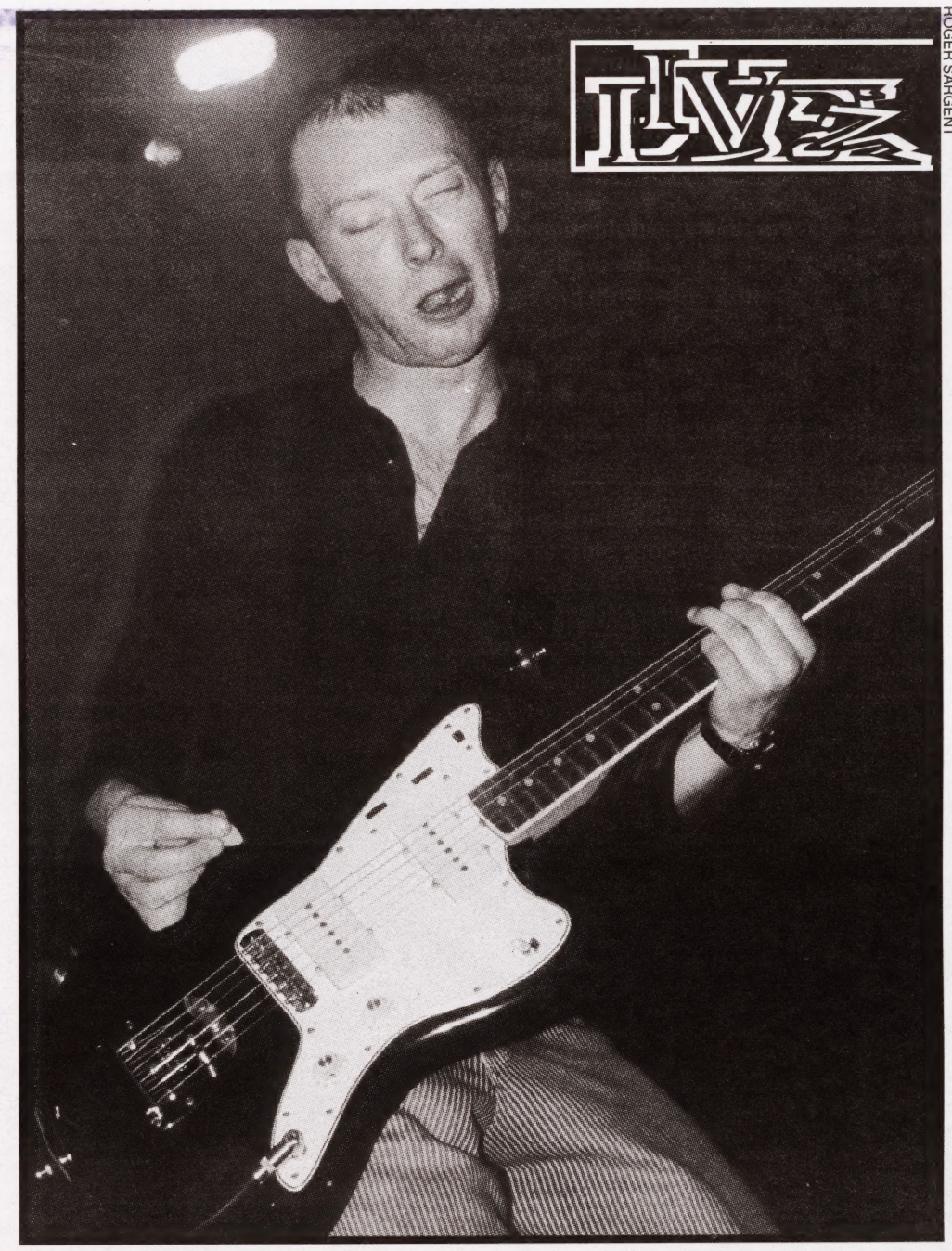
Which they do, easing them into Spanish consciousnesses alongside older songs whose choruses are gleefully shaded in by the vocal local colour. Songs like 'Fake Plastic Trees' and 'Nice Dream' have been unveiled so many times in so many cities that they now sound like devotional hymns, while a speeded-up and strobed-out 'Planet Telex' has developed its own chemical kick, frazzling synapses and sending Thom into a frenzy of Ian Curtis arm-flailing in the process.

But it's with 'Airbag' that we first get to sample the great new taste of Radiohead. Here we are in an unexplored world of baroque but jagged guitars married to syncopated dub; and along with much of the new material it sounds a little like how this magnificent city looks: slow, ornate, rich, wary and alive. Perhaps now Barcelona can shed the hideous rock opera Freddie Mercury donated to her and don a more fitting anthem.

'Exit Music', meanwhile, sounds just like that, Thom singing a doomed protest song on an acoustic guitar solo for the first half before its fragile sadness is fleshed out majestically by the rest of the band. That it sounds a little perversely like Sinatra's 'My Way' is perhaps intentional: this is what it feels like when doing it your own way ends in disaster.

'Karma Police' finds Jonny seated behind an electric piano as Thom coos imploringly for the karma police to *"arrest this man, he buzzes like a fridge"* over a comely swoon that uses Johnny Marr and Lou Reed as twin launchpads, but without actually borrowing anybody's melodic phrasing. The single, 'Paranoid Android', then baffles locals with its schizo switch from gentle acoustic jangle and moan – backed winningly by neat percussion shaking from Colin and Ed – to full-throttle, screeching guitar apocalypse. It starts – oh yes – with a few hesitant lighters raised and ends with an approving and vigorous, if extraordinarily polite, pogo. At its conclusion, Thom allows himself a grin. If they like *that* one first time round, then they're going to love 'Climbing Up The Walls'...

This is a song that's possibly a distant, diseased relative of Primal Scream's 'Higher Than The Sun': and if 'Higher Than The Sun' is the sound of a youngster bounding into the playpen of life, scoffing all the goodies and looking innocently forward to the future, 'Climbing Up The Walls' *is* the future. Its slow, edgy sound is muffled deep in narcotic abuse and reeks of paranoia and weirdness, but as Jonny hammers out an Eastern motif and Ed scratches away over the stoned rhythm it attains a glowing, hopeful majesty – even when Thom starts screaming and bawling into the front row at the song's close. Phew. In an evening of incredible highs, 'Climbing Up The Walls' is a kind of dizzy peak.



The Thomster: 'Computer' boffin

They soothe jangled nerves immediately with the soft surrender of 'No Surprises', a gentle mix of the Velvet Underground's 'Sunday Morning' and their own 'Fake Plastic Trees'. Maybe. Maybe not, but a glockenspiel is wheeled on for Jonny – strapped up to the elbow and wrapped in concentration – to tap sweetly away on and the effect is deeply calming. Somehow Radiohead can veer from roaring catharsis to anthemic swoon without losing any intensity, as they demonstrate again during the first of three encores – battering the-so-soft-it's-Disney 'High And Dry' with the ragged explosion of electricity and metal that is 'Electioneering'.

Did we not mention enough of the old songs they played, of imperial versions of 'My Iron Lung' and 'The Bends'? Ah well, tonight was of the future. It was about a band who've found their voice so convincingly that they've invented a touching new musical language with which they can convey both simple and complex emotions beautifully.

The only downside to all this good news is that they are only playing once in Britain, at Glastonbury, between now and September. So if you've got a foreign holiday budgeted for this summer, perhaps it would be prudent to check Radiohead's European tour schedule before booking. And if that's impossible, console yourself with the thought of how other-worldly these songs will all sound by time they reach you in the autumn.

"This was the most nervous we've felt in over two years," says Thom, smiling into the cheers, clapping and chanting before a valedictory new song called 'The Tourist' smothers us in steamy longing and pushes us out into the heavy night air. "But you made it alright. Thanks very much!"

"It's over?" squeals a small Spaniard as the house lights come on and Prince Buster implores everyone to hit Phoenix City over the PA. "Over?" she repeats. "Nooooo!"

But yes, it's over. It's over, they didn't play 'Creep' and nobody noticed. Wow, that's some mighty victory.

Ted Kessler

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